
Sicilian Palimpsest: Cultural Memory of the Mediterranean

October 9 to 20, 2021 (dates in Sicily)

Island nations are special and unique places. In the company of Sicily we think of Ceylon, Formosa, Cyprus and Cuba, all places where the *genus loci* is unusually distinct and where the cultural and



Agrigento, Temple of Concord

historical layers are unusually rich and vivid. Sicily, like many of these other examples, also had the good fortune to find itself at the center of the known world during much of its history.

Trade routes by sea and by land are great conduits for the transfer of civilizations across the globe. While the Silk Route connected east with west, the Mediterranean was civilization's maritime conduit from the time of the Phoenicians on to the modern era, and Sicily found itself at the center of it in such a position that ships passing from Spain or the Atlantic towards Constantinople or from Europe to Africa could not avoid it and were drawn to its shores (see map below). It is not surprising that many of the places of Ulysses' adventures described in Homer's *Odyssey* take place on the "Island of the Sun".

Sicily witnessed and bears the stamp of all the major civilizations that the Mediterranean cradled: Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, the Holy Roman Empire, and finally the Italians as they moved from a collection of independent kingdoms to one nation. Even then, preserving its island independence or insularity, Sicily maintains its distinct identity today both culturally and politically. These civilizations each left important visual stylistic traces, which we find in the major architectural, urban and artistic monuments. Classical temples, open-air theaters, villas adorned with mosaics and frescoes, magnificently adorned



churches and chapels, Islamic cloisters, and Baroque cathedrals are all found in abundance.

Islands are a particular kind of bell jar when it comes to the shaping and melding of diverse civilizations, perhaps because the geography confines them close together to cross-pollinate, whereas on the mainland, different civilizations can just move on to a new patch of virgin ground, leaving the spot previously hallowed unchanged. So, in Sicily it is not unusual to find a classical temple that has been re-cycled as a cathedral like the one in Ortigia in Siracusa where Baroque icing surrounds robust Doric columns. Even the cuisine, always regionally unique in Italy, here reflects these many cultural influences, making it one of Italy's most exotic and varied.

Added to these layers of history and culture the topography and geography of

Sicily are just as varied and dramatic. The terrain is rarely flat (only in the west end of the Island around Trapani and Marsala) and rises precipitously from a dramatic coast line to a mountainous center. Mt. Etna, one of the world's largest active volcanoes offers a constantly changing pyrotechnic display, as we will see in Taormina on our last day.

Our eleven-night odyssey has been crafted to reveal these aspects of Sicily, and will take us in a leisurely clockwise circle around the island moving from west to east. Noted Rome based scholar, Jeffrey Blanchard will accompany us as lecturer, to the delight of the many of us who have enjoyed his company and erudition on past trips! We will arrive in Trapani and depart from Catania. As always, our stays have been chosen for the ambience of the place as well as for the quality and comfort of the accommodations and the succulence of the table, and have been planned to avoid one-night stays (with two exceptions).

A Note for the time of Pandemic: This trip has been rescheduled from March, 2020, when the



View from Erice of coast enshrouded in fog

decision to postpone the trip was made within a week of planned departure. Sicily was relatively spared the impacts of Covid-19 then or since, however travel there would have been impossible due to lockdowns and flight cancellations. Planning for fall 2021 is predicated on a number of factors still unknown, however, at the time of the trip, those safety precautions being advised at the time will be adhered to, and the viability of the trip will be determined prior to departure based on what is known then. No final commitment will be required!

Day 1, Saturday, October 9
Rome to Trapani

Arrive at Trapani's tiny Vincenzo Florio Airport at Birgi, where the group will assemble and meet our local guide and driver. We will drive the short distance to the island of San Pantaleo or Mozia, one of the most important Phoenician sites in Sicily. Here the Giuseppe Whitaker Museum houses and displays the important finds, including the magnificent 5th c. bce Motya Charioteer, excavated in 1979. We will then check into our hotel beside the former fish market in the port of Trapani. We have chosen this spot pleasantly situated within the town's ancient ramparts by the sea, as the perfect place to spend three days acclimatizing, recovering from jet-lag and making day trips. Time is unplanned this afternoon so you can explore the town. We will gather for drinks and a welcome dinner at a nearby restaurant.

Detailed Itinerary

Day of departure, Friday, October 8, 2021 In transit from home

Depart from home with Trapani (TPS) as your destination. (Book your international flight to Rome --FCO-- in order to connect with Alitalia AZ 1801 departing at 1:30 pm for Trapani --TPS--arriving at 2:40 pm on March 14, 2020, and book this flight as part of your overall itinerary.



Above: The temple at Segesta

Day 2, Sunday, October 10 Selinunte and Marsala

Today we will take an excursion to Selinunte and Marsala. Selinus was founded by the Greeks in the mid 7th century BC and was destroyed twice by the Carthaginians (in 409 by Hannibal and again in 250 BC). The toppled columns of its three temples make a picturesque ruin by the seaside. Temple G is the second largest temple in Sicily after that of Olympian Zeuss at Agrigento. In the afternoon we will return to Trapani around the western coast via Marsala. Stopes will be made (time permitting) in Castelvetrano to see a magnificent church by the Serpota brothers and in Mazzarao del Valle to see the museum where a spectacular undersea find, the ancient Greek bronze *Dancing Satyr* is housed. Reaching Marsala, we will visit the museum of tapestries to see its eight

16th century Flemish tapestries and then we will stop at the Florio distillery for a tour and taste of their marsala. Back in Trapani we will have dinner in a local restaurant.

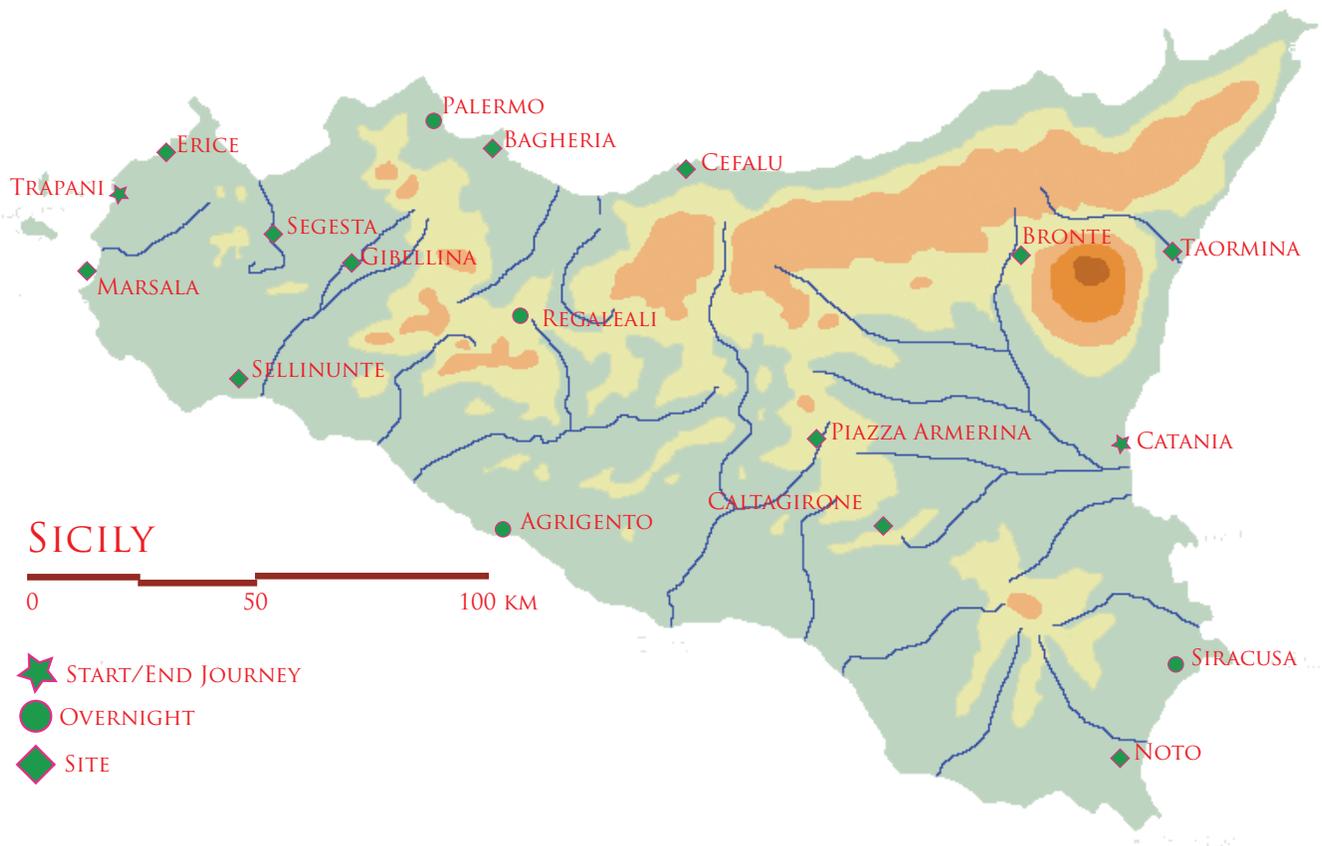
Day 3, Monday, October 11 Segesta and Gibellina

Not far to the east lies Segesta, a dramatically isolated site with a great, unfinished Doric temple and a theater whose backdrop is the panorama of the distant countryside. The Greeks established this site, and the temple was constructed first in 430 BC, and the theater followed in the 3rd century. It is not clear whether the temple's smooth (unfluted) columns and lack of a cella indicate that the construction was not completed, or that these features were intended.

In the afternoon we will visit Gibellina further to the south. This town was

destroyed by an earthquake in 1968, and the remains were immortalized by the Tuscan artist Alberto Burri, whose work *il Cretto (the crack)* is a huge concrete mat placed where the town stood, marking the pattern of the streets and the blocks. A new town has been constructed in the vicinity and has become a showcase for works of art, architecture and urban design by contemporary Italian practitioners including Pomodoro, Quaroni and others.

Following this, we will drive to Erice, a picturesque town often high in the clouds. We'll hope they part for us, revealing stunning views of the coastline in all directions. After exploring the town with its churches, bastions and piazzas, we will repair to the simple family run Hotel Moderno, whose restaurant is the best in town.



Day 4, Tuesday, October 12 Palermo

We will leave Trapani and begin our circumambulation of the island, heading the short distance to Palermo. We will stop on the way at Monreale, at the top of a valley above Palermo where the Normans (William II) built a great cathedral, abbey and palace beginning in 1172. It is here where we will discover for the first time that melding of Norman and Arabic styles that is so unique to Sicily. The cathedral's essentially Norman form is then covered with Islamic patterns of blind arcades of pointed arches and geometric surface decoration. Inside there are splendid mosaics depicting scenes from the bible. We will have lunch nearby or on our way into Palermo.

Beginning the descent down into Palermo, we will discover Sicily's capital city and principal port flanked by mountains on both sides and in the center of a great crescent bay. Our first stop will be the Capella dei Normani whose crown jewel is the Palatine Chapel, built by Roger II, grandfather of the king who built Monreale. Nearby is

San Giovanni degli Eremiti, also built in the mid 12th century under Roger II and one of the most famous Arabo-Norman monuments in Palermo. It has an elegant central plan with domes supported on Moorish squinches.

We will check in to the Hotel Piazza Borsa, a recently restored former bank. We will walk to the nearby Oratorio di San Lorenzo for a private candle lit viewing of the magnificent plaster sculpture decoration by master Giacomo Serpota (1656-1732), followed by a dinner as the guests of la Principessa di Raffadali in her nearby palazzo.

Day 5, Wednesday, October 13 Palermo

This morning we will embark from the hotel on foot, to take in some of Palermo's more rarified sites, including the Mussolini era post office, more of the fantastically baroque stucco work chapels of Serpota, including the Oratorio del Rosario di Santa Cecilia. These chapels are resplendent with the vivid and expressive figural plaster sculpture of the master.

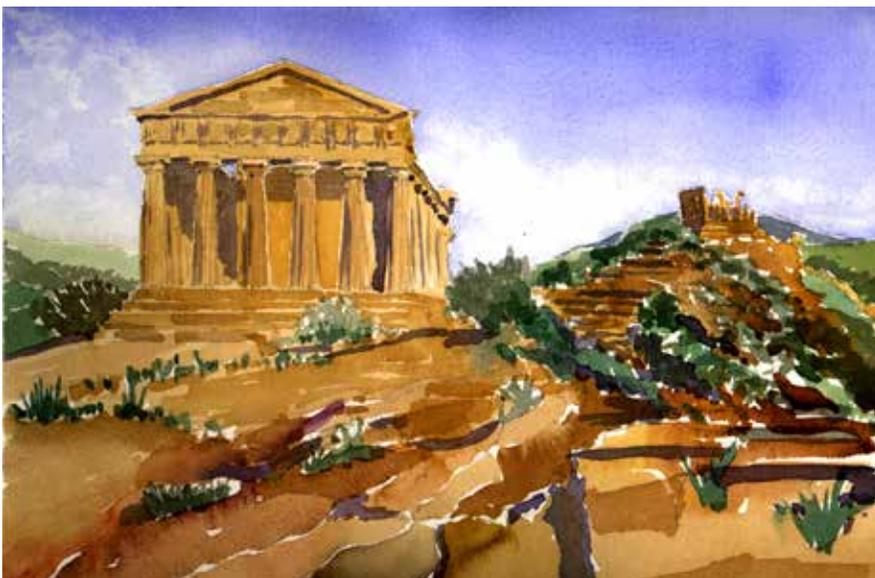
Next, we will see some of Palermo's great urban places: Piazza Vigliena, (or *Quattro*

Canti for its four canted corners) leads to the Piazza Pretoria with its spectacular baroque fountain carved by a Florentine. San Cataldo, the seat of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre was also built during the Norman period and is a blend of Arabic and Norman styles. For dinner, we have organized a special menu at the very nearby Buatta Cucina Popolana.

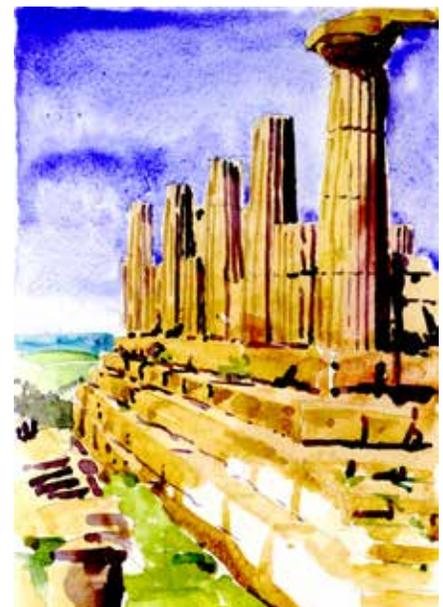
Day 6, Thursday, October 14 Cefalu and Regaleali

Before leaving Palermo, we will visit the recently restored Archaeological Museum and the remarkable Palazzo Abetellis, a fine arts museum reconceived by the architect Carlo Scarpa in 1953. Scarpa is renowned for the way in which he respects the historic fabric, while celebrating and distinguishing the modern interventions. We will see there works by great masters, including Antonello da Messina and others.

We will continue on to Cefalu to visit its Duomo, another project initiated by Roger II and built between 1131 and 1240. It sits majestically against the rock escarpment above the sea. We'll have



Agrigento, Temple of Concord, above left, and Temple of Juno, above right



lunch at a local seafood restaurant before turning inland to the mountainous center of the Island where our destination is Regaleali, the Masseria (farm) of Tasca d'Almerita, one of Sicily's oldest and most distinguished wine producers. We will spend the night here in the recently restored bedrooms of the traditional family villa. Here we have arranged our own private wine tasting and dinner of locally produced fare.

Day 7, Friday, October 15 Agrigento

After a leisurely breakfast we continue our drive south through dramatic mountainous countryside, we will reach Agrigento, where we will spend the balance of the day exploring the Valley of the Temples, although "valley" is somewhat of a misnomer as the four golden Doric Temples are in fact prominently sited on a ridge. The city was founded in 580 BC by settlers from Rhodes and Crete. The temples were built during the reign of Theron (488-472 BC) but were burnt by the Carthaginians and later restored by the Romans in the 1st century BC, and finally gradually declined due to seismic activity and quarrying. The better preservation of the Temple of Concord is due to its conversion to a church. In the late afternoon we will enjoy the passeggiata in town and see the Angiolo Mazzoni post office from the 1930s. Dinner will be at our hotel, Villa Athena, with its commanding view of the Temple of Concord.

Day 8, Saturday, October 16 Piazza Armerina, Caltagirone, Siracusa

We will continue eastwards towards Piazza Armerina, to see the late Roman



Above: The Baroque façade of the Cathedral in Siracusa, whose core is the Greek temple of Apollo

(3rd-4th century AD) Villa Imperiale del Casale, known for its grandeur and for the extent of its mosaics. We will have lunch in nearby Caltagirone, famous for its brightly decorated pottery. Finally, we will drive to Siracusa, occupied by the Greeks from the 8th century BC, from 416 to 413 BC it vied for domination over Athens. The interest of its seaside setting is heightened by the Island of Ortigia which is its oldest part and the place the Greeks settled first. The Grand Hotel Ortigia, overlooking the harbor, will be our home for the next two nights. Dinner will be at Don Camillo.

Day 9, Sunday, October 17 Siracusa

Today is devoted to exploring Siracusa. We will begin on foot with Ortigia, where the cathedral incorporates a 6th century BC Doric temple. Further afield on the mainland is the Neapolis with its many well-preserved classical monuments, including a Greek theater, Roman amphitheater, limestone caves, and a large 3rd century BC altar. Tonight, we are invited to drinks and a selection of

local cheese and salumeria with Baron di Benevento del Bosco at his palace facing the Duomo. He will show us the grand rooms and his many collections including maps and works on paper documenting the architecture of Siracusa. Dinner (if you still have room) is on your own.

Day 10, Monday, October 18 Noto, Lentini, Catania

Leaving Siracusa, we will first head south to Noto, perhaps the most notable ensemble of baroque buildings in Sicily. The town was completely destroyed in 1693 by a severe earthquake and rebuilt 10 km away from its original location with an expansive and well-organized baroque plan. Next, we will retrace our steps northwards to La Biviere, where we have been invited for lunch by Contessa Borghese at the villa and garden she created there from desolate swamp land, incorporating a collection of antique buildings transformed in a unique and personal way.

For our final leg we move to the slopes of Mt. Etna. Our first stop will be in late afternoon we will visit the monumental center of Catania, including the Piazza del Duomo, the fine palazzi surrounding it (including a private visit to Palazzo Biscari), and the Teatro Bellini, which opened with a production of *Norma* in 1890. We will spend the next two nights here in the small and private Hotel Liberty hidden away on a quiet residential street. Catania is a hidden gem also for its cuisine, where after being inspired by the raw ingredients on offer in its central market, we will sample the local cuisine at Mé Cumpari Turiddu.

Day 11, Tuesday, October 19
Catania, Taormina and Mt. Etna

Today we will visit picturesque Taormina and circumnavigate Mt. Etna. We will head out from Catania up the coast, we will soon reach Taormina, an enchanting town above the sea on the slopes of the mountain. Abandoning our vehicle we will walk through its pedestrian-only streets to reach the ancient theater from which we can enjoy the view, much as the ancients did, over the frons scenae and admire Mt. Etna, its puffs of smoke glowing fiery orange! Taormina has long been a great draw for British aesthetes, and we will visit the emblematic Casa Cuseni, a recently restored arts and crafts villa from 1905 built by Robert Ktison and decorated with murals and furniture designed by Frank Brangwyn. Leaving there and circumnavigating Mt. Etna,

we will marvel at the land's geological interest as we arrive at Bronte, known for its cultivation of pistachios and where a farewell lunch created just for us awaits us at Fucina del Vulcano, whose young chef, I first encountered in Rome at the neighborhood Sicilian restaurant I often frequent. We will return to Catania with time for a walk to work off our lunch, and if anyone is still hungry, we can have dinner at Trattoria del Mare.

Day 12, Wednesday, October 20 Depart



Individual or group transfers will be arranged to the airport at Catania for flights home. Buon viaggio e ben'tornato!



Top: Taormina as seen from the sea. Above: Mt. Etna from Taormina